



**Virginia Social
Services System**

**Strategic Planning
Steering Committee
Consensus Process**

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1. Introduction

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

It is important to remember that a consensus decision does not mean that everyone agrees. It does mean that all members have had an opportunity to express their opinions, have been listened to by the group and everyone agrees to support the decision.

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and that no one has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!). It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered.

Acting according to consensus guidelines enables a group to take advantage of all group members' ideas. By combining their thoughts, people can often create a higher-quality decision than a vote decision or a decision by a single individual. A group seeks consensus by thinking cooperatively.

It is the responsibility of each group member to ensure they remain 100 percent objective at all times. The consensus process will be invalid if it is influenced by subjectivity.

If group members don't trust each other to speak and act in good faith for the good of the group, it is impossible to proceed. Trust is a prerequisite to the consensus process.

2. Executive Summary

The consensus building process is divided into three stages. Stage 1 "Understanding the Proposal" is when the proposal is first submitted to the group. In this stage group members will have the opportunity to review and clarify the proposal. They will be able to state concerns and the facilitator will attempt the first call for consensus.

If the group does not reach consensus it will move to the second stage "Resolve Concerns". This stage will list all the concerns the group may have and then utilize three individual approaches to resolve those concerns. Within this stage there will also be multiple calls for consensus as part of each individual approach.

If consensus is not reached by the end of the second stage, the group will move to the third and final stage "Closing Options". This stage has been designed to ensure the group does not end up in a deadlock situation where no decision would be made. As the goal of the process is for the group to reach consensus, this stage should only be entered as a last resort. In the third stage the proposal presenter will have the opportunity to remove the proposal from further consideration. The facilitator will once again ask the individuals with concerns to stand aside. If they feel they cannot then the next step is to go to a simple majority vote of those group members present. If the simple majority vote results in a deadlock situation then the final step will be for the group chair person to make the final decision. All members of the group will support this decision.

3. Consensus Building Process

The consensus building process is divided into three stages:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Stage 1:</i> Understanding the Proposal. | Submitted proposals are reviewed for understanding and concerns. |
| <i>Stage 2:</i> Resolve Concerns. | The group attempts to resolve concerns. |
| <i>Stage 3:</i> Closing Options. | When consensus is not reached the group will vote on the proposal or to have the chairperson make any final decision. |

3.1 Stage 1: Understand the Proposal

3.1.1 State the Proposal

A presenter presents the proposal to the group members, if possible, in written form. If time permits, the presenter will distribute the draft proposal prior to the meeting.

3.1.2 Clarify the Proposal

The facilitator opens the floor for clarifying questions. The purpose is to ensure the group members have a clear and common understanding of what is being proposed. This is the time to clarify the proposal, *not* to raise objections or concerns about its merits, impact, or effects. It is appropriate for members to suggest ways of improving the proposal. Any suggested modifications should be recorded by the scribe.

3.1.3 State Concerns

Once the group is satisfied that the proposal is clearly understood, the facilitator asks if anyone has any concerns with the proposal as stated. What is being sought are all *legitimate concerns*. Legitimate concerns are possible consequences of the proposal that might adversely affect the organization or that are in conflict with the purpose and values of the group.

The group facilitator should remind the group of the definition of legitimate concerns as concerns are presented.

It is imperative to allow time to receive responses from all team members. The facilitator must create an environment in which people are encouraged to share their opinions and perspectives.

3.1.4 First Call for Consensus

If no concerns are raised, the facilitator may declare that the group has reached consensus, or he or she may ask the group, "Have we reached a consensus?" If there are no objections, the group has reached consensus.

3.2 Stage 2: Resolve Concerns

3.2.1 List all Concerns

If concerns are stated, the facilitator and the scribe should try to distill each one into a short phrase. A co-facilitator or the scribe should write these summations so everyone in the group can see them. Group members should assist in summarizing stated concerns.

Writing concerns on a flip chart page helps the group to focus on the concern, not the presenter or the person stating the concern. The facilitator can use this process to build group cohesion and consensus by reminding the group of the distinction between legitimate and personal concerns. Depending upon the sophistication of the group, the facilitator might even ask the group to validate each concern as it is presented by asking the question: “Might this be a *legitimate* concern?”

Members may want to clarify concerns, but should refrain from repeating concerns already listed on the board. There is a tendency (a hold-over from our voting processes) to repeat or second a concern in order to give it more weight with the group. There is also a tendency (a hold-over of our advocacy or competitive processes) to lobby for a concern by repeating it or rephrasing it in several different ways. No concern needs to be repeated or seconded.

Once all the concerns are listed, it is useful to spend time having the group look over all of the concerns as a whole. They can then check for duplication, clarity, and wording to ensure that they have a list of unique concerns.

After the group has finished listing its concerns, the facilitator can judge how close to consensus the proposal is. If the concerns are many and the time short, the proposal may be continued to a later meeting.

If time permits, the group members must now put their heads together and attempt to integrate the concerns into the proposal. The group seeks consensus by thinking cooperatively.

3.2.2 Resolve Concerns

The proposal is explained or changed to address concerns. The presenter has first option to resolve the listed concerns by using one of the following techniques:

1. Clarify the proposal
2. Change the proposal
3. Explain why the proposal as stated is not in conflict with the group’s values
4. See if those with concerns will stand aside.

Stand Aside

Group members stand aside when they have concerns about a proposal, but they can live with it. Standing aside signals that the person feels his or her concern has been heard, understood, and considered, although not necessarily accepted, by the group in its final decision.

Cross Through Concerns

If those stating concerns are satisfied with the presenter's explanation of or changes to the proposal, they indicate so by having the listing on the board erased or crossed through. Other group members may assist the presenter in resolving concerns.

Resolving concerns is a creative process with a goal of producing the best possible decision.

3.2.3 Second Call for Consensus

If all the concerns listed have been resolved, the facilitator asks if there are any unresolved concerns. If there are none, the facilitator announces the group has reached consensus.

3.2.4 Evaluate Group Purpose and Values

If listed concerns have been adequately discussed and remain unresolved, and concerned members are unwilling to stand aside, the facilitator moves the group to a new level or resolution in which it examines the nature of the concerns. At this level the discussion moves beyond the impersonal evaluation of the proposal and of listed concerns to probe the group purpose and values.

The group needs to assess how the unresolved concerns relate to the group's purpose and to the larger audience that its decision affects.

3.2.5 Third Call for Consensus

Once the unresolved concerns are scrutinized in light of the group's purpose and values, the facilitator will identify one of the following conclusions:

1. The concerned member withdraws the concern or stands aside;
2. The member withdraws the concern based on the group purpose evaluation; or
3. The member is not willing to withdraw the concern or stand aside.

In the first case, the facilitator announces that the group has reached consensus, and the scribe notes the concern in the minutes. In the second case, the facilitator announces that the group has reached consensus. In the third case, the scribe notes the remaining concerns. Having reached this point in the process, the facilitator may note that the group is still at an impasse. With that being the case, it is time for the next level of evaluation.

3.2.6 Evaluate Individual Motives

If there has been thorough discussion on the groups purpose and values and how they relate to the unresolved concerns, and individuals have been heard, understood, and considered in the total decisions, any further impasse is most likely due to personal dynamics or vested interests, not group purpose. It is the responsibility of each team member to ensure they remain 100 percent objective at all times. The consensus process will be invalid if it is influenced by subjectivity.

Most likely these kinds of concerns won't be resolved in a business meeting or work session. If team members don't trust each other to speak and act in good faith for the good of the group, it is impossible to proceed. Trust is a prerequisite to the consensus process.

Group members should be given the opportunity to examine their concerns objectively. This may occur by adjourning for a short break or by postponing the final call for consensus until a future meeting.

3.2.7 Final Call for Consensus

The facilitator calls for consensus one final time. If any concerns remain, the facilitator moves to Stage 3, "Closing Options." Otherwise, the facilitator announces that the group has reached consensus.

3.3 Stage 3: Closing Options

3.3.1 Presenter Withdraws Proposal

A presenter may withdraw the proposal from further consideration and allow the group to proceed.

3.3.2 Stand-aside

Group members stand aside when they have concerns about a proposal, but they can live with it.

3.3.3 Conduct Majority Vote

It is possible at this stage in the process to conduct a majority vote process. This will be a simple majority, which will be sufficient to make a decision. The simple majority vote decision will be fully supported by all team members. If the vote ends in deadlock, then section 3.4 (Chair Person Decision) of the consensus process will be invoked.

3.3.4 Chair Person Decision

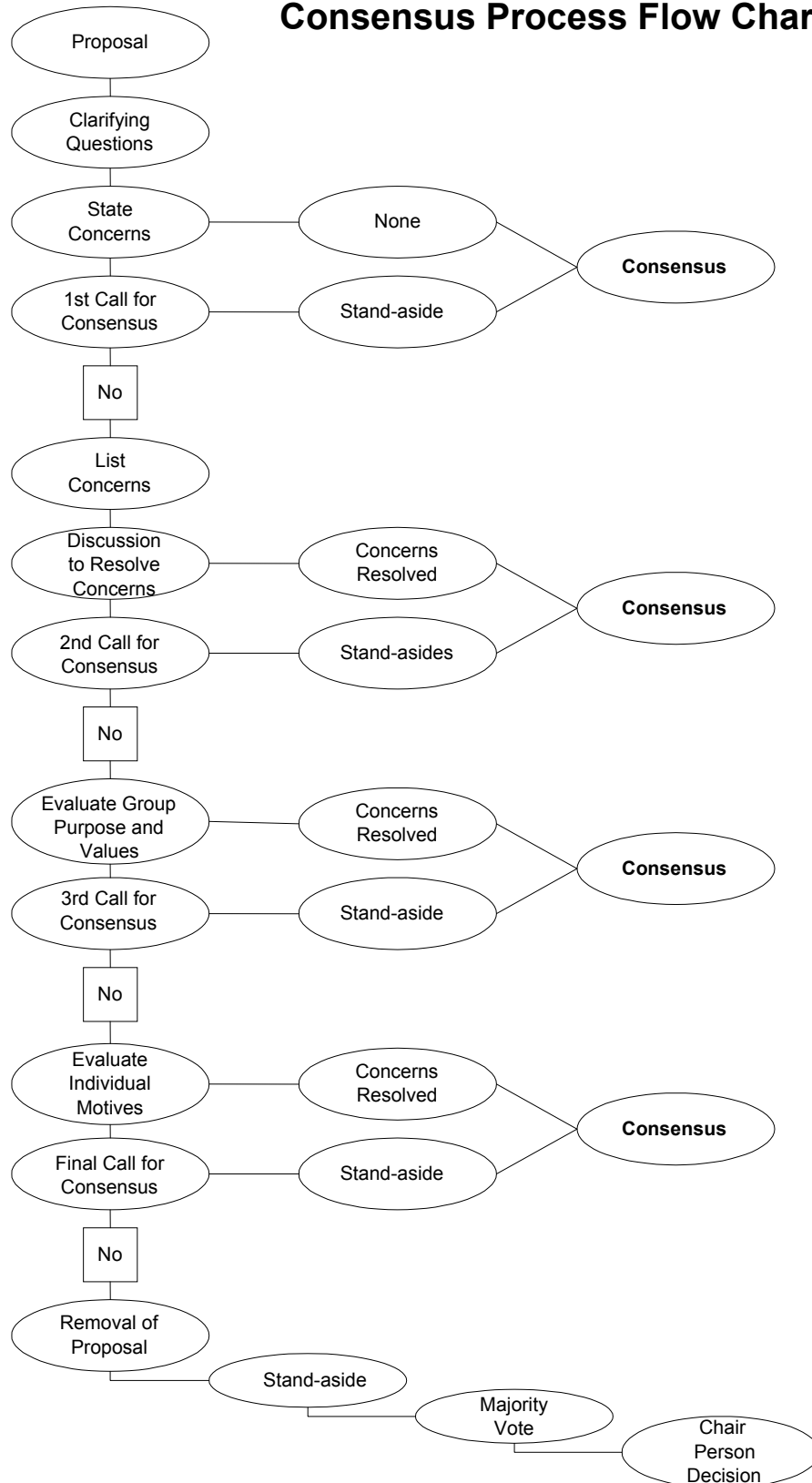
By default of not obtaining a simple majority vote, the group, will authorize the Chair Person to make a decision on the proposal. The Chair Persons decision will be fully supported by all team members.

Stage 1: Understand the Proposal

Consensus Process Flow Chart

Stage 2: Resolve Concerns

Stage 3: Closing Options



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